

**State of the City Address  
Mayor Walter Maddox  
September 20, 2007**

We are building a bridge to a brighter future.

And, I am proud to say, that over the past two years, we have made significant progress thanks to the leadership our City Council and the dedication of our staff.

Our progress is being felt in West Tuscaloosa where our efforts to reverse generations of neglect are making a difference.

From upgrading the infrastructure, to the elimination of blighted property, our commitment is being realized.

For West Tuscaloosa, our most significant achievement is the City's storm water drainage initiative Noah's Ark.

Over the next three years, Noah's Ark will provide a \$14 Million investment in West Tuscaloosa, which will reduce flooding, open up residential and commercial sites, and increase pride, and confidence in this great community.

Our progress is being revealed in the transformation of downtown Tuscaloosa.

After two years of engineering and demolition, the first phases of construction will begin on our downtown urban renewal project.

By February, we will have broken ground on a new Inter-Modal Facility, which will provide 445 parking spaces, and be the hub for all of Tuscaloosa's transportation needs.

In a major step to bring a pedestrian-feel to our Central City, the Inter-Modal Facility will be accompanied by a new plaza that will incorporate a block and a half of green space and trails in the heart of downtown.

These are only two examples of a \$100 Million public/private investment, which is planned for our Central City over the next five years.

Our pledge to be more open, efficient and effective is working, as evidenced by the expansion of e-government services, such as paying your water/sewer bill on-line or receiving email notification of a council or committee meetings.

The cornerstone of our efforts is Tuscaloosa 311, which is helping over 275 citizens daily access THEIR government.

We know the people of Tuscaloosa pay our salaries, and 311 is energizing our core belief of improving customer service and being more accountable. Our commitment to comprehensive planning is stronger than anytime in our history.

By the end of the year, the final additions to the updating of our 1972 Land Use Plan will be complete, and three more Council districts will embark on area specific plans, which help to protect the integrity of our neighborhoods and balance economic growth. We are not only talking about comprehensive planning, we acting on it.

In a major policy shift from the past two decades, the City has enacted a new sewer policy to promote planned residential and commercial growth within our City limits.

Not only will our new sewer policy serve as an incentive for expansion and comprehensive planning, it will help us maintain the second lowest water and sewer rates in Alabama.

Our progress is now being seen with the environment. In June, we became a “Cool City” as designated by the Sierra Club.

Being cool has resulted in the City converting to bio-diesel. Our conversion has significantly reduced our green house emissions.

Furthermore, it will reduce our dependency on diesel by nearly 100,000 gallons annually.

Our cool effort with the environment does not end with bio-diesel.

By 2010, we will have expanded our recycling service to 4,000 more homes.

Time prevents me from recognizing all the tremendous strides our Council and staff have made in the past two years.

However, I cannot resist taking a moment to acknowledge the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Initiative.

Building off the foundation established by Dr. Levey and the Board of Education, this year, the City Council funded five additional pre-k teacher units that will reach nearly 100 more academically at-risk four-year-old students.

Why Pre-K?

In today’s education world, if you start behind, you stay behind.

The national average for children entering Kindergarten not ready to learn is 40 percent. In Tuscaloosa, the average is 56%.

Making matters worse, Alabama ranks nearly dead last in providing funding for Pre-K.

Our children deserve better.

And, our teachers and administrators need our support to ensure that every child is ready to learn when entering Kindergarten.

Instead of ignoring the problems, Tuscaloosa is doing what it does best – Putting aside political, geographical and governmental boundaries to solve a crisis in our community.

The heroes in this initiative are many, and I would like to recognize a few:

- Tuscaloosa City Board of Education
- Tom Joiner
- Jim Harrison
- Shelley Jones
- The United Way
- Stillman College
- West Alabama Chamber of Commerce
- The University of Alabama

In the next two decades, hundreds, if not thousands of students will graduate high school and begin the path to success because of the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Initiative.

The past 24 months have demonstrated how a government focused on results can generate the winds of change.

As we look over the horizon to the next 12 months, it will be vital that we continue our positive momentum because the challenges and opportunities ahead for Tuscaloosa will be greater than anytime in recent years.

Our first challenge will be the economy.

Tuscaloosa's economy is strong with the rapid growth of the University and the growing commercial and industrial markets.

Our economic strength, coupled with our conservative approach to budgeting, netted one of the largest annual surpluses in memory.

However, from Wall Street to 15<sup>th</sup> Street, we see signs that the rapidly growing economy of a year ago is now slowing, but certainly not stopping.

Clearly, the rising cost of goods and services resulting from higher fuel cost, and the uncertainty in the stock market is impacting the spending of our citizens.

With 74 percent of our budget coming from sales taxes, the City adopted an extremely conservative budget projecting two percent growth in our primary revenue generators.

Being conservative does not mean we are not optimistic about the future.

To the contrary, as the national markets correct themselves; our community is still expanding in all sectors including commercial, residential, industrial and tourism.

Adapting to the challenges facing our economy is relatively easy, compared to what I feel is the greatest challenge before our City; and that is ensuring those who commit the crime serve their full sentences.

As I review media reports across Alabama, I know that all major cities are experiencing similar situations where a homicide or major crime receives "red hot" media attention.

This issue is more than perception or statistics; it is about the people we represent.

We all hurt when our citizens and neighborhoods are harmed by those who do not value or respect human life.

For Tuscaloosa, fighting crime is not a resource issue.

25 percent of our general fund budget is allocated to the police.

For FY 2008, the police department's budget increased by \$1 Million and includes new officers, technology and vehicles.

We are putting more police officers on our streets than any time in our history, and it is resulting in more arrests and a reduction in major crimes.

Despite our unprecedented commitment to public safety, we continue to see a critical breakdown in several areas beyond the control of local governments.

For example, in the majority of homicides that have occurred in Tuscaloosa, the parties involved had extensive arrests and convictions.

Clearly, common sense should dictate that individuals who committed these crimes would be in jail and not on the streets.

Based on discussions with our local judges and law enforcement officials, our state prisons are severely overcrowded, and too many non-violent offenders are being released prematurely; thus, they are not serving the maximum sentences and are not receiving maximum rehabilitation.

It is disheartening to the excellent work of the Tuscaloosa Police Department to see individuals we have arrested multiple times being shuffled through the revolving doors of the criminal justice system, only to be set free to prey upon the people of our community.

As with our Pre-K endeavor, I am proud to tell you Tuscaloosa is taking the initiative.

We are reaching out to the University community and other major cities across the State in an effort to build a coalition that will work with our state legislature in addressing this critical public safety issue.

In the meantime, we will continue to put more officers on the streets, invest in community out-reach programs and utilize Federal programs to keep our streets safe.

In the final analysis, the safety of our citizenry will depend upon the State's ability to ensure that there is adequate space for criminals to serve their full sentences.

Now to the opportunities.

From the upcoming expansion of Buttermilk Road to our Anti-Litter Initiative, there is so much progress taking place in every corner of this City.

Since time is limited, I want to discuss an opportunity for our Central City.

For nearly a quarter of a century, City leaders have looked to our downtown and riverfront with an eye towards creating a signature venue whether it is a convention center or amphitheater.

I believe our time has come, but the question is what and where.

As most of you know, for the past six months, the City has been in negotiations with MMI regarding a potential Hyatt Place on the City Fest lot.

Beyond Hyatt Place, our long-term vision has always been that a convention center would be adjacent to a hotel on this lot that would strengthen Tuscaloosa's ability to host larger state conventions.

Whether Tuscaloosa is ready is being evaluated by Strategic Advisory Group, which is one of the premiere firms in the nation that evaluates a community's ability to afford a convention center.

If we make a decision to build a convention center, we must be certain of two things: First, the new revenue generated annually must be greater than the debt service issued to construct it.

Second, the convention center's operating budget must consistently finish in the black, especially after the initial start-up.

If SAG determines we cannot meet these thresholds, then I would recommend that we continue to wait until the market conditions are right, or a better solution is presented.

On parallel tracks, we are also evaluating the feasibility of an amphitheater.

Unlike a convention center, an amphitheater would not be viewed as a primary source to generate new revenue, since its cost and operations are considerably less than a convention center.

A decision to build an amphitheater would be based on improving the quality of life.

As the crown jewel of our riverfront master plan, an amphitheater would offer a venue for major concerts beside one of Tuscaloosa's greatest natural resources.

However, I see it more than a place for the next American Idol.

I believe its greater mission can be as a community gathering place for the cultural and performing arts.

Imagine hundreds, even thousands of people gathering inside a first-class outdoor venue, along the side of the Black Warrior River that can host the Tuscaloosa Symphony, Tuscaloosa Children's Theater, Stillman Choir or any other function for this community.

We can make this happen.

When Dr. Joseph Volker, former President of UAB, was outlining his vision for the university and community nearly 40 years ago, he stated, “We would do Birmingham a disservice if we dreamed too little dreams.”

Today, I want to borrow from Dr. Volker’s wisdom and apply it to our City because this is extraordinary time in our history that requires all of us to reach a little farther.

We have a University, under Dr. Witt’s and Dr. Portera’s leadership that is realizing its full potential.

We have United States Senator Richard Shelby who is infusing Federal funding into our Central City.

We have a thriving industrial base and expanding commercial and residential markets.

And, we have a progressive City Council who are working together to achieve the promise of tomorrow.

I have never been more excited to live in Tuscaloosa than I do today. I hope you feel the same way.

Over the next two years, we will seize the opportunities that God has graciously provided us and we will continue to dream big in our efforts to build a bridge to a bright future.